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ABSTRACT

The relationship between language and culture is examined briefly, and instructional approaches to developing cultural awareness in language students, particularly Chinese students of English as a Second Language (ESL), are discussed. It is noted that effective cross-cultural communication requires an understanding of culture's role in governing appropriate language use, and that cultural errors can have more serious results than linguistic ones. Cultural knowledge affects listening comprehension, oral production, reading, and the accuracy of translation. Major causes of cultural errors are inadequate knowledge of and insufficient exposure to the target culture, and lack of comparative studies of cultures, and cultural awareness must be made a goal of the language curriculum and testing. While traditional second language instructional materials focused on grammar and other linguistic elements, a more culture-based approach to their construction is needed, particularly one reflecting contemporary social and language changes and social language usage. Teachers can promote cultural awareness through cultural comparison, explanation of cultural context for language use, incorporation of cultural topics, visual aids, and use of cultural readings. Teacher familiarity with the target culture is also recommended. (MSE)

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ED 399 820

Developing Awareness of Cross-Cultural Communication

Liao Xiaoqing

This paper first discusses the relationship between language and culture and then to propose approaches to ensure that culture is taught effectively.

1. Language and culture

Culture is the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behaviors, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society , to which language is inextricably tied.Language is part of the culture and culture governs the appropriate use of the language. To ensure effective cross-culture communication, we should speak language according to the culture; otherwise we will make cultural mistakes including the inappropriate use of language and unacceptable social behaviors in cross-cultural communication. ESOL students may produce perfectly correct sentences and behave gracefully by their cultural norms,yet their language behavior may appear awkward or peculiar to an English native speaker. There is an investigation to show that there are four common types of cultural mistakes made by Chinese students who are unaware of the target culture: (1)inappropriate use of language from the point of sociolinguistics,as in the case where Chinese gracious greeting"Have you eaten?"or"Where are you going? "are used as greeting instead of"Good morning! How are you?ect."to native speakers of English; (2)unacceptability in customs,such as Chinese overmodesty in response to proper praises always by using"No,Never,Not at all, etc. ":(3)contradiction between the English and Chinese value senses

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such as interfering in foreign teachers'privacy; and(4)simple and general view of foreign countries like the belief that all Americans are rich. It is clear that these mistakes are made by unawareness of the target culture and can be overcome by the knowledge of the culture.

Cultural mistakes can lead to more serious results than linguistic mistakes do during cross-cultural communication. When we say a sentence without conforming to a grammar rule such as losing a -s to a plural noun, we still can be understood and forgiven by foreigners.But a sentence that interferes in people's privacy may lead to misunderstanding,or even worse, a communicative breakdown. As Wolfson notes, "In interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax . In contrast,violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners since the native speakers are unlikely to be aware of sociolinguistic relativity"(1983:62).Therefore,it is more important to prevent cultural mistakes than linguistic mistakes. In classrooms it is one of the main duties to develop students' cultural competence.

2. Cultural knowledge for reading and translation

Cultural knowledge not only can affect oral production but also facilitate reading comprehension and make translation more accurate. Reading does not only depend on grammar and vocabulary but also on the competence to find the cultural information in readings. If we don't know the meteorological phenomena in England, we are hard to understand why Shakespeare compared his friend to"summer's day"in the famous verse"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"Therefore,we need cultural knowledge to avoid misunderstanding and to interpretate accurately. When translating, the cultural competence is also needed to make translations accurate.

Lacking the relevant astronomical knowledge, a Chinese scholar once translated the"Milky Way"into *niu nai lu*(=a road covered with milk) ,thus leaving a standing joke in the circle of translation.

Also, learning the cultural knowledge is a good way for the ideological education.The Syllabus of Secondary English in China requires that the teacher carry out ideological education through the whole teaching process so that students can get ideological benefits. Knowing the target culture, students can have a better understanding of foreign countries and learn to"discard the dross and select the essence". By comparison of the two cultures, they can also find better traditions of our country and promote the cream of our national culture, thus getting ideological benefits.

In a word, ESOL students learning English can not hope to obtain communicative competence in the target language without a good knowledge of the culture related to the language. ESOL teaching involves two languages and naturally two cultures.Students need the cultural knowledge in addition to the language knowledge.

3. Measures to culture teaching

It has been shown that the major causes of cultural mistakes are unquestionably inadequate knowledge of and insufficient exposure to the target culture as well as lack of comparative studies of the two cultures. All these come down to the failure to give sufficient attention to culturally-oriented courses in English teaching. To change the situation and increase cultural awareness,we need to take measures in the folloving three main aspects:

3.1. Syllabus design and examination

A syllabus is a description of the aims and contents, etc.of a course

of instruction. Cultural awareness must be made one of the goals in language syllabus. Special studies should be made to show the negative effects of lacking cultural awareness in cross-cultural communication so as to enable teachers as well as those who hold responsible positions in educational establishments to see the importance of cultural factors in interpersonal contact. TESOL Syllabus should also provide and explain the ways and procedures in which the target culture is to be taught. Many foreign syllabi have recently given such detailed requirements. For example, in USA in 1983, the ACTEL Provisional Proficiency Guideline was added by the aim of cultural competence as an important component of the communicative competence.Thus culture teaching in classrooms is possible.

English examinations with cultual knowledge are also a major means to ensure cultual learning. Many high school students want to pass examinations to enter colleges and universities for higher education or to obtain an English certificate for a job. China's College English Entrance Exam has a great influence on teaching contents.If it contains a proper amount of culture testing contents such as different ways of greeting Chinese and American people; and the formal or informal ways to ask a stranger or a close friend for a favor, etc. then it may call for teachers' more attention to culture teaching.

3.2. Teaching-material compilation

Textbook writing should be approached from a cultural perspective. Traditional text materials were arranged for the convenience of grammar presentation.Therefore,most of the textbooks available are grammar-based, giving little or no attention to cultural contents. For example, Chinese prior textbooks have been almost characteristic of the model of"Chinese culture plus English language"such as asking foreign teachers about their names, ages, political likes or dislikes. The teaching materials compiled

during the Cultural Revolution contained such an ideological content of language practice:"Long live Chairman Mao!Workers of all countries,unite!" Such materials do not teach anything about the target culture.Even worse, they are harmful to cross-cultural communication. Therefore, "cultural information should be integrated into language materials"(Jarvis,1977:161) in order to ensure that language acquisition and culture acquisition are synchronized. Let's compare the following two dialogues.

Jack: Hello, Pete.Where are you going?The movies/cinema?

Pete: No. I am hungry. I haven't had lunch yet.

Jack: Neither have I.

Pete: Come on then! Let's go and get something to eat.

Jack: Fine! Where do you want to go?

Pete: Look! There' Helen. I don't want to see her.

Pete: Neither do I. Let's hurry.

This is well-composed dialogue from a linguistic point of view. The patterns are useful,the utterances are short and easy to say and memorize and can be reproduced in new situations. However, from the viewpoint of culture acquisition,it lacks something,for the students can hardly obtain any cultural information from it. If its contents were altered, doses of culture could be injected into it.

(In Britain)

Helen: Hello, Jean. Where are you going?

Jean: I'm going to get a magazine and some chocolate.

Helen: Let's go to that news-agent on the corner. I want some cigarettes.

Jean: I want to go to the one down the road. I've got to send off his parcel and there's a post office in that one.

This dialogue tells that in Britain a news-agent's shop not only

sells sweets and tobacco, but sometimes contains a branch post office as well. Through practice students learn the language and at the same time acquire cultural information.

In addition,textbooks must reflect the changes of modern language and culture, thus enlivening TESOL and keeping it up with modern development of our society. Many Chinese course books are very old. Opening the textbook *Senior Book Two* currently used in China, we are impressed with the medieval social environment. Of 18 texts,14 are the literature works written before 19th century.Only one text entitled"At Home in the Future" describes the modern social life.

Finally, textbooks must contain as many expressions used widely in social situations as possible. Our prior textbooks often contain only one sentence: "Would you mind shutting the window? "or"Would you mind opening the window? "Actually, there are many other ways of expressions. Wilkins (1983:51) gave eight expressions to the first;and Finocchiaro and Brumfit gave seven to the latter (1983:16) . The expressions should also be accompanied by knowledge of how the different expressions are used in different social situations so that students know to take one of them according to their judgement of its appropriateness. For example, if we want to teach students how to get a match from other people in order to light a cigarette, we might explain how every expression is used in a specific situation as in the Ervin-Tripp's example(1976:29):

(1). Make a statement about his or her need:

"I need a match."

(2). Use an imperative:

"Give me a match."

(3). Use an embedded imperative:

"Could you have a match?"

(4). Use a permission directive:

"May I have a match?"

(5). Use a question directive:

"Do you have a match?"

(6). Give a hint:

"The matches are all gone, I see."

(qtd. in Richards, 1990)

3.3 Teacher's responsibilities

The teacher plays a decisive role in culture teaching. As an interpretor and transmitter of two different cultures, he must ensure that students (1) know the close relationship between language and culture; (2) gain the cross-culture awareness; (3) overcome the "barriers to culture perception such as the ethnocentrism, and prejudice and prejudgment" (Trifonovitch, 1980:550-553) . To be specific, the teacher can try the following ways .

(1) Cultural comparison. Since differences between Western and Asian cultures are maximal and different cultural features produce different linguistic features, it is necessary to find many different cultural features through comparison and contrast between native and foreign languges. Chinese and English languages have many difference which may fall approximately into three types: (a) Cultural main commonality. Both languages have something most in common but little different. e.g. Chinese *gan bu* and English "cadre"; (b) Cultural variation. Both have something with the same referential meaning but with quite different associations. Chinese *gou* (dog) can refer to an evil but English "dog" a friend; and (c) Cultural gap. One culture has something that the other lacks. Chinese culture has no legends and words such as Zeus, Apolo and Jupiter.

(2) Culture aside. The teacher must consciously reflect cultural

perspectives in the course of teaching. He should explain not only grammatical usage but also referential meanings and social meanings. These include the following four aspects: (a) appropriateness of language to the social situation; (b) gestures, distances maintained, inarticulated sounds, (c) values, mores, taboos, rituals, habits, art forms, and (d) social institutions (Finocchiaro and Brumfit: 1983: 30). In teaching a dialogue, for example, try to tell something about the situation in which the dialogue occurs, the sentence functional meanings, the ways to speak appropriately in the situation, etc. but not always the 3 teaching steps: vocabulary explanation, then structure analysis and finally translation.

(3) Culture topics. The teacher should try to create situational activities and through role-playing explain and demonstrate the differences in a society. For example, ask students to discuss cultural differences within China. China is a big country which has over 50 peoples with culture features different from each other. Even the Han nationality has differences in different places in China. This kind of discussion can make students understand that the cultural differences is a natural social phenomenon.

(4) Visual aids. Students should have easier access to visual aids such as films, video tapes and radios. It is generally agreed that what helps in culture acquisition is first and foremost personal contact with native speakers, followed by access to films and videotapes. In China, we organize students to watch CCTV's English teaching programs, video recording such as *Going through U. S. A.* and programs for teaching the textbooks - *Junior English for China*; and listen to VOA's English teaching programs like *English 900*. On watching and listening, the teacher asks students to pay attention to everyday conversation such as telephone language and dialogue in the street. These will "forcefully make the students sense that

they are entering another culture,not merely taking up strange noises for familiar things"(Lado,1979:152).

(5) Culture Readers. Culture acquisition can not be achieved merely through classroom teaching, therefore, apart from classroom readings,give students extracurricular reading materials such as novels,drama and plays like *Britain Today, Living in the USA*, etc. through which they can also learn some cultural features. Lado pointed out: "since literature is expressed through language,one cannot understand it unless he understands the meanings of the culture expressed by the words of the language and unless the values and cultural experience against which the literature is written are also understood"(1979:151).Consider the following:

> "When her father took the phone she went over to the window, forgetting that there was no need to place herself out of earshot of this silent man."
>
> (Anderson,1982:100)

from these words, students learn that in western countries,people usually go away when others are making a telephone,even a daughter and her father are doing so.This is a cultural phenomenon different from Chinese.

To ensure the above responsibilities, ESOL teachers should strive to be bicultural, or at least familiar with the target culture. If possible, they should be provided with an opportunity to be trained in the country of the target language so as to have a period of total exposure to the culture . At the same time they themselves should use every means available to enlarge their knowledge of the foreign countries and familiarized themselves with the target culture. It is a truth that only when language acquisition and culture acquisition are synchronized will students be able to obtain what Hymes called "communicative competence."

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